

Comparative Views of Ageing in a Multiracial Family

“Clearly, grandparents around the world provide an important safety net for future generations. In doing so, they also absorb much of the burden of care that would otherwise fall to governments and associated social services.” (Dolbin-Macnab and Yancura, 2018, p.23)

My Nana

I am one of many people whose grandmother was deeply involved in their upbringing. For my first few years, my Nana lived in the same house as us, and provided daily childcare, education, and affection. She was, and continues to be, a guiding force in our family. Because both of my parent’s worked throughout my childhood, my grandmother’s presence was extremely important for our family’s financial and overall stability.

My Nana was born in England to a working-class family, and she was able to get an education on a government scholarship. During school, she met my grandfather, and moved around the world to teach. My grandfather passed when my mother was very young. As such, my Nana was faced with a large responsibility in raising my uncle and mother on her own. Because she is an immigrant, she had no other nearby family to support her. This means that she has always been a pillar of support for my family across generations.

In her retirement, she continues to be active within her community and within our family as a caretaker, as someone who passes down family traditions, and an educator. She passed down the stories of resistance within my family that began with her grandmother who was a suffragette and her father and brother who were union organizers. She remains active physically and mentally, and provides guidance to family members in times of emotional distress. In her own words, she is “just a little old lady”, but that identity never precluded her from being a matriarch in our family.

My Grandpa and Grandma

My relationship with the elders in my family is not uniform. My family is multicultural, with my paternal grandparents both being the children of Japanese immigrants who were interned at a young age. While my relationship with my Nana, my maternal grandmother, was characterized by emotional closeness, education, and play, this was not the case with my Grandma and Grandpa. While my grandparents gave up their Japanese names and traditions, there was still an element of respect that was expected of us in our relation to them. Children were expected to answer questions politely, but not annoy the adults at family gatherings. My grandparents did not play with us or really engage within my family dynamic outside of the occasional gathering. This is possibly a result of the trauma they faced in internment, or a result of the stoicism that runs through Japanese culture. As they get older, they are perceived as a greater and greater burden by my family, especially as they lose certain abilities such as hearing. My father often jokes that he will never get old as he does not want to be burdensome. This devaluing of people as they age is contradictory to an anti-oppressive/anti-ageist practice. This is something that I must consider and be reflexive about in my future practice should I ever work with elderly clients. The narrative around ageing in my paternal family contrasts strongly with my Nana’s self-construction.

“Social workers and other helping professionals behave as humans do; they are not free from prejudicial beliefs. Moreover, this beliefs could potentially seep into way social workers treat older clients, as well as how they approach gerontological practice and the extent to which they value their clinical practice with older adults.” (Azulai, 2014, pp.8)

“As the senior lifegivers of their societies, it was the “old ladies” who carried the fires of their nations. They held the responsibilities for overseeing health, well-being, and longevity of their communities...” (Anderson, 2011, p.131)

Reflections

From my own positionality between two cultures, it is clear that ageing can be constructed in varying ways. Within my maternal family, which originates from working-class England, my Nana’s age was never considered a caveat to her participation in her family. However, it is not lost on me that there is a gendered expectation in many societies that grandmothers provide care to children within the family. Additionally, my family’s working class background is a contributing factor to the role my Nana played within our family, providing an alternative support system to social services (Dolbin-Macnab & Yancura, 2018). This engagement with family and community opposes the assumption that is common in Western societies, and is pervasive in my paternal family, that the elderly are burdensome or have nothing to offer. Within Indigenous communities, it is clear that elders continue to contribute to the community in a myriad of ways, outlined by Anderson (2011). It is important to acknowledge that within the broader Western culture that I was brought up in, elders are often derided and constructed as burdensome, sometimes to the point of being infantilized. This is a bias faced by elderly people in our society that I must be aware of in my future practice. I am aware that ageing means different things within different contexts. Indigenous communities perceive elders in different ways than settlers do. My paternal grandparent’s status as elderly means they are in need of care taking, and are done with their responsibility within the family and community, whereas my Nana is seen as having responsibility as a caretaker and continues to be active in the community despite being the same age.

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References

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